

The Contemplator's Short History of Women in the Revolutionary Era

The background music is *Johnny's Gone for a Soldier*

Sequenced by Lesley Nelson-Burns

This is a "Short History" and is not meant to be comprehensive. If you are interested in further reading two resources and links to related web sites are listed below.

For the majority of women, life in the Revolutionary Era centered on the home. Invariably a man was the head of the household and women had a supporting role. If a woman did not have a husband she was probably assisting a parent, relation or master. Women fed the family, made clothing and household essentials, cleaned house and clothing, cared for and supervised the children (her own and any others that might live with the family), and served as nurse and midwife. Few items were purchased and most were manufactured in the home. Kettles, knives, nails, salt and tea would come from shops but candles, soap, clothing and food were domestic produce that took countless hours of work. Life was labor-intensive.

Although common laws were not uniformly enforced, a wife had few legal rights. Under law she could hold no property and a husband was legally entitled to beat her for disobedience. Spinsters and widows, however, could own property and manage property - until they married. Divorce was difficult and rarely granted, although courts did sometimes allow couples to live apart. In a novel approach to the difficulty this presented, couples in Maryland and North and South Carolina drew up divorce agreements, published them in newspapers and considered themselves free to remarry. These were not, of course, legal divorces. Other women simply ran away from bad marriages. Husbands often advertised for runaway wives in the same way they advertised for runaway slaves. In the lower and middle classes, marriages were sometimes made and unmade solely upon mutual consent.

Women indentured servants did not have the freedom to marry without the consent of their master. If they did so they were subject to fines or extension of their service. Women who bore illegitimate children during their service were subject to the same and could also be publicly whipped. Free white women in populated areas could often find employment as maids, cooks, laundresses or seamstresses.

Black women servants, unlike white women servants, worked in the fields as well as the house. During the Revolutionary Era there were laws in the South and in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania against interracial marriage. Black slave women were also subject to sexual exploitation and abuse for which there was no legal recourse.(1)

Diaries of women in the 18th century show hours devoted to ironing, cooking, baking, sewing and knitting. In the Fall women would preserve fruit and vegetables, in the winter they would salt beef and pork and make sausage. These were part of women's chores whether they lived in urban or rural

areas. In urban areas labor and materials were more readily available and therefore, for those who could afford it, less time had to be spent on domestic chores.

In addition to domestic work women found gainful employment. In addition to work as maids, cooks, laundresses and seamstresses, women had businesses of their own. As noted before women could inherit their husband's business. Women owned apothecaries, foundries and taverns. They were barbers, midwives, sextons and blacksmiths. Many women took in boarders for extra money. There were also many women printers. While these should not be seen as the norm for women they do illustrate that there was some economic opportunity for women.

Prior to boycotts of British goods, manufactured cloth was inexpensive and in urban areas cloth was usually bought rather than manufactured. However, in rural areas spinning and weaving were important household tasks. It was predominately done by young women, hence the origin of the words "spinster" and the "distaff side". Colonial boycotts of British goods increased the necessity of manufacture and raised the art of spinning from necessity to an act of political protest. At one political gathering on Boston Common, women brought their spinning wheels and worked a full day.(2)

The Revolutionary War disrupted life for many American women. Women either followed their husbands to war or stayed at home to run the business and manage their homes alone.

Many women dressed as men and fought in the war. It was far more common for women to be camp followers. While the word "camp follower" has come to be synonymous with whore, the camp followers of the American Revolution were generally married women (with their children), who followed their husbands. They were recognized as part of the military, receiving rations - half rations for wives and quarter rations for children - and were subject to military discipline. (One woman, for instance, was jailed for using abusive language to an officer.) Camp followers earned pay as cooks, nurses and laundresses.

Women who were left alone were forced by necessity to make decisions that had been left to their husbands. As troops occupied areas many families fled to relatives, adding extra burdens to households. In many areas women were forced to quarter troops.

Proximity to troops and to war also brought about the danger of rape. The Connecticut towns of Fairfield and New Haven were raided in 1779. Women were systematically brutalized and raped in Staten Island and areas in New Jersey when they were occupied in the fall and winter of 1776. Women were kidnapped and held for days in army camps. British troops in Newark went "about the town by night, entering houses and openly inquiring for women."(3)

The ideals of liberty and equality did not come to fully encompass women. However, during the Revolutionary War women voiced their political opinions freely and were considered part of the Revolutionary effort. Despite the freedom of speech and Republican ideals, following the Revolutionary War women were still primarily relegated to the domestic sphere and a women's role was limited by society. However, a woman's role in the household was given greater importance. The Republican woman's duty was to create a supportive, virtuous environment and she was valued for doing so. On the other hand, although domesticity became more important, the definition also became more rigidly defined. Women outside the domestic sphere became less feminine and less acceptable. The result was that women were accepted outside the domestic sphere only in those activities that fit broadly into the domestic context, such as teacher or missionary.

- (1) Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, Scott Foresman & Co., Boston, 1980, 196.
(2) Linda Grant DePauw, *Founding Mothers*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1975, 153.
(3) Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, Scott Foresman & Co., Boston, 1980, 203.

Related Links

- [Women's History in America](#)
- [Colonial Women](#)
- [Women's Roll Before and During the Colonial Period](#)
- [Notable Women of Early America](#)
- [Women in the American Revolution](#)
- [List of Other Contemplator History Sites and Information](#)

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